

Post and Post-Post Modern Self-Portraiture



During the heyday of post-modern art, from about 1965 to 2000, audiences would look at a minimalist piece like Bruce Nauman's "Self-Portrait as a Fountain" (pictured above) as representative of a certain cutting edge, away from depth and towards surfaces and ironies. If we take Abby Heller-Burnham's "The Walls Have Ears" (also pictured above) as a kind of self-portrait, we get sleek surfaces, ironies, and even the kind of absurdities which animated Nauman's most famous works (look at how the composition places Heller-Burnham's head, in a picture on the wall, ensuring super-humorous "meta-consonance" in the painting, opposing in diagonal rhythm the head of the seated girl in the foreground). If something makes Heller-Burnham's self-portrait richer than Nauman's, it's that she manages to work in a complex narrative, as Nauman does not; are the figures in the painting Heller-Burnham's lovers (thus charging it with homoerotic intentionality and import), or ex-lovers, or lovers of merely her art, or merely her body, and how do they all relate to each other? Heller-

Burnham has a Trickster's eye for how to exploit spatial dimensions to her advantage; the women, and the way spaces are sliced and diced, suggest that the artist finds herself in confinement in relation to the social, sexual, and artistic circumstances around her. Nauman is just an impish kid in comparison. And there's no real reason to view "Self-Portrait as a Fountain" more than once. "The Walls Have Ears" is so endlessly suggestible that to do it justice either formally or thematically could fill a long expanse of well-spent time.